

'Economy woes start with Iraq'

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Taking polls is American as apple pie. Maybe even more American, since polls seem to influence how so much of our country works. From key decisions made by our presidents to trifles like which comics appear in our newspapers and everything in between, the mood on the street can be a very powerful thing.

But sometimes those polls have even more clout than we realize. One common tool used by pollsters, and beloved by media, is a survey asking Americans to rank which issues they believe are most pressing to our country.

Over the years, the "most important" issue has changed many times. Often jumping back and forth between domestic and international issues, we've seen crime, economy, education, health care, Iraq and terrorism all top the list.

My concern is that too much attention is given to that top spot, often at the expense of other vital issues. Case in point is Iraq. Bringing an end to the occupation of Iraq is a key issue for me and for many of my constituents on the Central Coast. And for the past few years, it's been the No. 1 priority for much of the country. But lately, the economy has taken its place.

Of course it's important for the American public to understand how recent policies have damaged our economy, and it's heartening that Republicans are finally joining with Democrats in an effort to address the problems their policies have brought us. But if the media is allowed to shift attention away from the president's failure in Iraq, they do a disservice to everyone.

After all, Iraq itself is the reason for many of our national woes. The bipartisan rancor we are seeing in Washington is aggravated by the war in Iraq, with Democrats intent on ending the war and the GOP absorbed in extending it. And the economy, the newest "most important" issue, is in its current position largely because of the resources that have been

squandered in Iraq.

The Center for American Progress puts the tab for the Iraq war through 2008 at more than \$600 billion; assuming steady troop levels, it predicts another \$900 billion will be spent through 2017.

The National Priorities Project, a research group, adds that the war will cost the country more than \$155 billion in 2008, which works out to a bill of nearly \$20 billion for California.

What could California do with that \$20 billion? We could provide 400,000 children with health care, build more than 80 new elementary schools or hire more than 16,000 elementary school teachers. This war is costing our country far too much, both in lives and in treasure.

But even the trade-offs are not entirely legitimate. You see, this war has been funded by borrowed money. Tossing about figures in the billions is scary enough, but our national deficit has now eclipsed \$9 trillion, a painful legacy of the Bush administration's time in office. That's more than \$30,000 per American.

So what can we do about this? First and foremost, we must maintain pressure on the administration to end the occupation of Iraq. We must keep the war in the public eye. There are many ways you can help achieve this, from calling elected officials to writing a letter to your local newspaper. Even more valuable, I think, is to engage family and friends on the issue, let them know how you feel and ask them to call their own representatives. Only by working together can we end this war.

By the time this column appears in print, I hope that Democrats and Republicans will have agreed on an economic stimulus package for our nation. Our economy needs a pick-me-up, and I think some of the ideas being kicked about have great potential. In addition to tax rebates, I am hopeful that mortgage assistance will be included in the package, and I'm working to ensure that the stimulus will be aimed at low- and middle-class families.

But even as we work on stabilizing our economy, we are not forgetting about Iraq. We're

rapidly approaching 4,000 Americans killed, not to mention many thousands of Iraqis. Our nation's reputation is in tatters, and our foreign policy is suffering. A core of Congressional leaders know how important it is to continue plugging away at the war, pressuring the administration and working toward peace.

And we'll continue to do so. It's an effort that will save countless lives and make our country stronger in the process. Thanks to everyone who has already helped us on this mission, and thanks to those of you who continue to do so.